

# Deconstructing Literacy Primers

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*Literacy primers developed for illiterate adults, the target population of Total Literacy Campaigns, serve a socialising and acculturating function. Do they reflect the reality of the lives of illiterate adults, men and women? What are their ideological underpinnings and whose interests do they serve.*

THE Total Literacy Campaigns (TLCs) that are specifically designed to address the problem of adult illiteracy have to be seen not only as social but as cultural phenomena. Cultural values, ideas, beliefs, are constantly transmitted both overtly and covertly in the educational process. In the school system, textbooks are the repository of formalised learning but in the case of the TLCs, the absence of materials except for literacy primers in most cases, virtually guarantees the sanctity of learning from the primer. The questions that need to be asked are; 'Who is defining knowledge?' 'Whose knowledge is considered of most worth?' Such questions recognise the curriculum of TLCs as being characterised by selectivity, involving choices of what to teach, which in turn highlights the ideological nature of such choices.

The literacy primers developed for the illiterate adults pose a challenge in text probing. For, they are written for those men and women who constitute the poorest and the most deprived strata of society. The Revised National Policy on Education (1992) has therefore emphasised the need to involve the participants of the literacy programme in various development programmes. The policy document has further stipulated that the National Literacy Mission (NLM) should be geared to such national goals as poverty alleviation, and focus specifically on environmental Conservation, observance of small family norm, national integration and promotion of women's equality. With regard to women's education, the policy has emphasised that the education system would play a positive interventionist role in the empowerment of women.

On the basis of the above policy directives, the directorate of adult education (DAE), a subordinate office of the department of education in the ministry of human resource development (MHRD), issued a set of guide-lines to the state resource centres (SRCs) which are registered societies fully funded by the MHRD, to assist in preparing suitable literacy primers for the illiterate adults. The emphasis in these guidelines on the concept of improved pace and content of learning (IPCL). The thrust of IPCL is on pace, as the name suggests, and an emphasis

on a certain core content relating to the above mentioned national goals. A thin booklet, spelling out the IPCL guidelines, was initially issued by the DAE to various SRCs. This was subsequently replaced by 'Handbook for Developing IPCL Materials' published by the DAE in September 1993. While the actual writing and publishing of the literacy primers for the TLCs is the responsibility of the SRCs, in most states of the country, the fact remains that an agency wanting to develop its own literacy materials has to strictly adhere to the IPCL guidelines. Furthermore, a national level committee set up by the MHRD scrutinises the content of the literacy primers in order to ensure a certain uniformity of form and content among them.

Considering the fact that primers serve a socialising and acculturating function, it was thought that a systematic analysis of the content of the literacy primers would be useful. Questions such as 'from whose perspective are the primers designed?' 'Do the primers reflect the reality of the lives of the illiterate adults, particularly of the illiterate adult women?' were considered to be of particular relevance. Six literacy primers in Gujarati, Marathi, Hindi and Tamil to represent the states of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and the UT of Pondicherry, were carefully analysed. The analysis revealed that there were certain patterns that were common across the various language primers.<sup>1</sup>

One of the principal concerns addressed in literacy primers are various development problems and issues. While development problems such as illiteracy, health, agriculture, population issue, environment degradation, information about certain government schemes/services are addressed in the primers, interestingly the underlying assumption in the lessons that deal with development issues is based on the modernisation theory of development. According to this understanding, it is individuals who need to bring about a change in their attitudes and behaviour so that they can improve their conditions and participate actively in the development process. Similarly, illiteracy is posed as a problem due to the attitude of the illiterate adult. It is the individual's lack of initiative

and absence of motivation that is considered to be responsible for the problem of illiteracy. Illiterates are regarded as uninformed, as lacking in knowledge and literacy is regarded as a panacea for their ignorance. There is thus no attempt to understand why certain sections of the community have no access to education in the first place. The larger structural issues are not even recognised, much less addressed.

The basic thrust is 'victim blaming' and not 'system blaming'. Individuals have to be thrifty, save money and thereby better their economic condition. Individuals have to seek information about health matters through individual initiative and thereby bring about personal and family betterment. Individuals have to protect their environment and avoid environmental degradation. It is enlightened individuals who can deal with social evils of dowry, excessive drinking, belief in superstitions, etc. It is enlightened individuals who will restrict the size of their families and thereby deal with the problem of population growth. Rarely is change considered feasible through community initiative and community participation.

What is disquieting is that despite 'women's equality' being stated as a national goal, it is basically the ideology of domesticity that is promoted in the literacy primers. Thus, women's principal responsibility as depicted in the visuals and in the text, remains within the confines of the home and it is the nurturing, nursing, caring role as a mother and as a housewife that is emphasised. In these texts a woman's identity is established through her status as a married woman- for rarely are women shown as widows or as independent single women. Also, the husband-wife relationship is always hierarchical. In this relationship, the husband is the authority figure and the woman is either a helpless character, often a housewife content to do all the household chores. Despite women's participation in the economy, the literacy primers not only pay insufficient attention to this aspect, they also fail to impart knowledge and skills that would improve women's productive role. In other words, there is the overall tendency to emphasise the domestic and reproductive role of women and to invisibilise the productive role they play in society. In the Marathi primer, a female character Sumitra elaborates on her daily routine. After getting up at five o'clock in the morning, she washes utensils, finishes her cooking, takes the washing to the well, collects water, then goes to the field with her husband's food and assists in the field. On her return home in the evening, she collects cowdung as well as fuelwood. When she reaches home, she feeds the cattle and milks the

buffalo, then cooks the evening meal, while her old mother-in-law takes care of her younger child. Sumitra would like to study but she doesn't find time. But Sumitra is uncomplaining - she does not question the sex role patterns that are responsible for her doing all the household chores. She is reconciled to her status as a wife, mother, daughter-in-law. She even seems content. Even when there are attempts to show women as protagonists, by and large, such examples are few and far between. In the Hindi primer from Bihar, there is an attempt to portray a woman character (Kamala) as a village sarpanch. But Kamala is one lone character who is portrayed in what would be regarded as a male preserve in the conservative Hindi belt and in that sense would immediately become an atypical character. On the whole, in all the six primers women and men are shown to have traditional stereotypical concerns that have characterised gender roles in society.

The perspective on the issue of population problem is that of the government. Poverty of the country is linked to population explosion. The Bihar primer has several lessons that are directly concerned with the population issue and others that have a latent message. The message clearly is that there are plentiful natural resources - enough land, adequate rains, thick forests, etc. However, these rich natural resources are not adequate because of the increasing population and it is the poor who are to be blamed for procreating, thus leading to over-population. As they throng public spaces, they leave little room for the 'others' who do not breed like them. In the primers from Gujarat, UP and Bihar, it is the simplistic family planning message of 'small family is a happy family' that is relentlessly pushed. The poor are clearly perceived as ignorant and uninformed. It is assumed that once they control the size of their families, all the problems would be solved. Thus no attempt is made to understand why the poor have large families in the first place. Nor is there an attempt to understand the adequacy or the effectiveness of the existing health infrastructure in meeting the health needs of the poor in rural areas. Women's role on population issues is clearly regarded to be supportive of the decisions taken by the husbands. The health needs of the women, besides those relating to maternal health, are not even recognised.

Even with regard to the issue of environmental degradation the approach is clearly to 'blame the victim' for it is the learner who is reproached for his/her ignorance about the importance of trees, the learner who is blamed for cutting down trees indiscriminately. There is thus no attempt to identify the real culprits such as contractors, the forest officials, the local

politicians who most often than not, are responsible for cutting down trees. The learner is also blamed for not taking good care of environmental sanitation. The assumption here is that there is sufficient water and that resources are readily available for maintaining environmental sanitation in rural areas. Even the gram panchayats are presumed to have the requisite financial resources to undertake various development tasks relating to environmental sanitation.

Of the core national values, national integration is also stated as one besides women's equality, propagation of small family norm and conservation of environment. This proved to be the most difficult for either there is a superficial treatment in some lessons through stereotypical representation of characters with varied dress and headgear or there is no attempt to portray the minority community either visually or through the text. In the case of the Marathi primer, except for one lesson on Akbar and in this lesson too, it is the legendary character of Birbal who is shown to outwit Akbar, there is no reference to a single character - male or female - who could be called a member of the minority community. There is no attempt even to refer to any cultural event or festival or present any overt symbol that would reflect the plural character of Indian culture. It is the 'textual silences' - or what the text omits - that highlights the ideological nature of the text. The names of the characters are only Hindu and any reference to festivals is to those celebrated by those belonging to the majority community. While the dress of women portrayed in the visuals does not stereotypically differentiate them, the fact that they are shown to be wearing 'bindis' and have Hindu names, confirms that certain 'exclusionary mechanisms' have been consistently used in the text. Interestingly, the UP primer reflects much greater acceptance of the multilingual and multi-ethnic character of the Indian society. But the emphasis throughout is on assimilation into a single monolithic identity for the sake of the country. This emphasis on assimilation is cleverly disguised under the garb of patriotism. The idea is to mould everyone into one 'dhara' - thus giving up personal affiliations and identities. This process of assimilation translates itself into a particular monocultural identity that is very "Hindu" in its orientation. It is apparent from the text that anyone who is different and wishing to preserve his/her linguistic and religious identity, would be made to feel guilty.<sup>2</sup>

#### ABSENCE OF SOCIAL CONFLICT

A remarkable feature of the literacy primers is the total absence of any kind of

social conflict. The social reality that is depicted in the primers is divorced from the material and social conditions of the poor in rural areas. Different caste and class groups coexist peacefully. Thus, Vadgaon is portrayed as a model village in the Marathi primer in which the development activities are carried out by the gram panchayat and all the basic amenities are provided to everybody in the village. This is because there is unity among all sections and there is no strife, no conflict. On the other hand, another village Pimpalgaon, lacks all these amenities because of an inactive gram panchayat which it is suggested could be activated by all the villagers coming together and finding a common solution. The overall image is thus of a harmonious social reality in which co-operation and solidarity among all members is possible. Conflicting social relations among members of different classes is absent from the society portrayed in the six literacy primers. Whenever there is any dissonance, it is quickly resolved through the intervention of a character. Most of the narratives have a 'fairy tale' quality about them as characters become instantly prosperous, husbands and wives live happily everafter, and the problems of the villages get instantly solved. Krishna Kumar (1989) has referred to the manner in which the areas covered by a typical

literacy curriculum follow a certain mythology according to which all the problems that the illiterate adult is faced with is due to a disorganised, unthinking, ignorant personality. What is promised to the illiterate adult therefore is better life, new knowledge and skills (including literacy), overall prosperity and general well-being. The state is perceived as a benign state that has the welfare of all the people at heart. The services provided by it are considered to be efficient and easily accessible. The role of the state and of the dominant classes in perpetuating class and gender oppression is overlooked, even bypassed. Rather, what is proposed is that inequities in society should be accepted and not be questioned.

Since adult learners are held responsible for their present state of poverty and illiteracy, the overall tenor of the lessons is to provide 'correct' information, to exhort the learners to change their negative attitudes so as to bring about a change in their behaviour. There is therefore a tendency to talk down to the learners as though the illiterate minds are 'empty vessels' waiting to be filled by the sagacious advice given in the literacy text. Freire (1985) refers to this phenomenon as the 'nutritionist view of knowledge' according to which the illiterates are considered as 'undernourished' and have to be 'fed' of 'filled' in order to know. So the illiterate adults are asked to come to study because it would be desirable for them to become literate. Adults are advised to save money and use it properly and not waste it. In most cases, the learners are perceived as a passive mass who have to be told -what to do and who do not have a life or will of their own. An analysis of the tone of discourse revealed that on the whole it tends to be didactic and patronising. Humour and light banter are remarkably sparingly used.

The analysis has highlighted certain recurring patterns among literacy primers developed by the SRCs. But even in the case of the Pondicherry primer that was developed by the Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS), a left-leaning autonomous NGO, the analysis revealed that despite the revolutionary fervour of the lessons, the real intent is to carefully bleach away any political questioning. Thus when the lessons state 'we must find out why', 'we must change all this', 'we must question plan outlays, defence expenditure, etc,' what we are witnessing is an attempt at co-option, at generating 'false consciousness'. Under the garb of radical rhetoric, the literacy primer is really promoting the agenda of the state. The 'pseudo-Freirean' nature of such a literacy primer is made explicit.<sup>3</sup>

The role of the state has to be recognised in order to understand the hegemonic

control that is maintained by it. By providing finances to the SRCs (as well as to autonomous organisations such as the BGVS), the state ensures that the information contained in the literacy materials is state-approved. Likewise, guidelines for preparation of literacy materials and constitution of a national level screening committee, further safeguard the state's interests. The ideological bias of the literacy primers, however, becomes evident for it is the culture of the mainly urbanised, middle class men that is invariably reproduced in them. The legitimisation of the culture of this dominant class occurs in two ways; overtly, through bias, stereotype and distortion of subaltern culture, particularly that of poor women, and covertly, through omission of and silences of subaltern culture and once again, that relating to the reality of the lives of poor women.<sup>4</sup>

The importance of undertaking such an analysis of literacy primers lies in the fact that it tries to decipher and analyse their ideological underpinnings and thus enables us to understand whose interests this ideology represents and serves. Besides this, such an analysis is useful in order to understand why and to what extent the literacy primers facilitate or hinder adult learning. One important outcome of such work, however, is the realisation that primer writing for adults is a complex endeavour that demands a creative response so that literacy learning becomes less daunting, less alienating and certainly more relevant and closer to the reality of the lives of adult women learners.

### Notes

[The observations which inform this paper come from a larger study undertaken by the National Institute of Adult Education, New Delhi. Those who collaborated in this study with me were Ua Patel, Ilina Sen, Prabha Krishnan, Sadhna Saxena and Azra Razzack. While acknowledging their individual contributions, I own responsibility for the particular analysis provided in this paper.]

- 1 Detailed analysis of the six primers has been attempted by the six researchers mentioned above.
- 2 Azra Razzack's analysis of the SRC primer from UP further showed how the four lessons that deal with the plural character of Indian society do not really get integrated into the text of the other lessons in that sense, stand apart.
- 3 Prabha Krishnan, in her analysis of the Pondicherry primer refers to what Ross Kidd and Krishna Kumar (1981) have described as the domesticating role of literacy programmes and termed them as 'pseudo-Freirean'. According to them, there are five steps through which education, which should have been liberating, succeeds in domesticating its object. These are-

- naming the central problem as 'poverty' rather than as 'oppression';
- identifying the cause of poverty as self-inflicted deficiency of the poor;
- proposing, as treatment, to change the behaviour of the poor through transmission of information and skills;
- converting Freire's method into a 'neutral' classroom technique without 'politics'; and
- defining 'action' as coping activity.

Krishnan's analysis showed that the central problem that characterises the illiterates is identified as poverty in the Pondicherry primer and while the literacy lessons urge learners to action, this action is not Freirean praxis but coping activity, channelling the collective energies of the learners down predetermined avenues.

- 4 While Timothy Scrase has not specifically focused his analysis on the issue of gender, his study on the content of English language primers and readers prescribed for use in West Bengal schools revealed that it was the culture of the mainly urbanised, middle classes that was invariably reproduced in the textbooks.

### References

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